

Using Certain Words on Social Networks Could Get the Feds to Place You on a Watch List

December 29, 2011 - This is just a downright creepy story with real privacy implications for anyone who uses social networking websites and who doesn't these days? According to the Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has compiled a list of watch-words that it is actively looking for on Social Networks. And they are making lists of anyone who uses those watch-words when on Twitter, LinkedIn, MySpace or any other social network; either by posting them or searching for them. But they are apparently not stopping there. According to EPIC, once you get on the watch list, the feds are supposedly sharing the information they gather on you with state and local governments, law enforcement agencies and even foreign governments. Secretly creating such a list would appear to violate current federal law. But even if it wasn't against the law, it begs the question: Should the federal government be spying on American citizens.

Tweet

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(function() {  
var s = document.createElement('SCRIPT'), s1 = document.getElementsByTagName('SCRIPT')[0];  
s.type = 'text/javascript';  
s.src = 'http://widgets.digg.com/buttons.js';  
s1.parentNode.insertBefore(s, s1);  
})();
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(function() {  
var po = document.createElement('script'); po.type = 'text/javascript'; po.async = true;  
po.src = 'https://apis.google.com/js/plusone.js';  
var s = document.getElementsByTagName('script')[0]; s.parentNode.insertBefore(po, s);  
})();
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DHS announced plans to monitor social networks almost a year ago. Frankly, government monitoring of social networks does make some sense. Especially when it comes to looking for foreign terrorists. But monitoring foreign terrorist activities and copying down the profile information of American citizens, storing that info and then sharing it, are two very different things.

Once the government elects to collect profile information associated with Americans and place it in a database of any kind, it becomes subject to the Privacy Act of 1974. That law requires the government to give notice of its intent and to solicit public comments. If it claims an exception to the Act, it still needs to publish its claims in the Federal Register. To the best of our knowledge, that hasn't happened in this case.

EPIC has now filed suit against DHS to find out exactly how far the program goes. According to their law suit, EPIC is claiming that DHS has gone beyond simple surveillance and is setting up fake profiles which it uses to "friend" people that it is actively watching. Again, very creepy.

Although it is not clear how EPIC assembled a list of words that it accuses the government of being on the lookout for, here are the words/phrases that they say could get you flagged for investigation:

- Human to animal
- Collapse
- Outbreak
- Infection
- Illegal immigrant

One has to assume that derivatives of these phrases could also get you watched.

The words themselves are also troubling. While the first four make some sense as they could all pertain to the use of chemical or biological weapons, the last phrase, "illegal immigrant" would appear to be more political in nature. It is certainly an issue that is currently before the Supreme Court and will likely be a factor in the 2012 election cycle. Watching people that use the phrase raises additional, very troubling, privacy concerns.

Of course, now that the cat is out of the bag, the monitoring program could collapse under its own weight. If millions of contrarian people decide to start tweeting these words, DHS may find it difficult to keep up.

byJim Malmberg

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